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Mitterrand raps New Zealand

Says France intends to continue nuclear tests in South Pacific

By Ronald Koven
Special to The Globe

PARIS — President Francois Mitterrand, responding to an accusation by New Zealand Prime Minister David Lange that France is treating his country like an "enemy," declared yesterday that while "France has no enemies in the South Pacific, it intends to get respect for its rights."

The exchange of bitter words was the latest episode in the conflict between the two countries since a Greenpeace ship was sunk by a bomb in New Zealand on July 10, killing a Portuguese crewman. Two French counterintelligence agents were jailed by New Zealand and are to stand trial on charges of murder and sabotage.

Mitterrand spoke on French television on his return from a hastily arranged trip to Mururoa Atoll, France's atomic test site in the Pacific, to proclaim France's intention to resist antinuclear protests in the region.

France, he said, will continue nuclear tests in the South Pacific "so long as it judges to be necessary the experiments useful for its defense, just like the four other nuclear powers — the United States, the Soviet Union, China and Britain."

Lange had accused the Mitterrand of whipping up a "wave of nationalistic hysteria" in France to help him in next spring's legislative elections. Both leaders head parties that belong to the Socialist

International. Mitterrand's Socialist government is considered almost certain to lose its parliamentary majority in 1986.

Valery Giscard d'Estaing, former conservative president, earlier had hailed Mitterrand's reaffirmation of the "continuity" of the French nuclear strike force. France's independence is "based on nuclear dissuasion," a Mitterrand spokesman said during the Mururoa visit.

A turn against the Socialists

The leader's dramatic flight to Mururoa, the first by a French president since Charles de Gaulle went there in 1966, also seems to have changed a political climate that had been turning heavily against the Socialists since the release of a government-commissioned report clearing the French secret services of any wrongdoing in the sinking of the Greenpeace ship.

Written by Bernard Tricot, de Gaulle's retired chief executive aide, the report took at face value the denials of members of a team of French combat divers who were in the port of Auckland when the Rainbow Warrior sank there. General reaction to the report in France and elsewhere was openly skeptical, and some Paris commentators spoke of "a French Watergate."

Speaking with reporters following his brief, solemn television appearance, Mitterrand was asked

what he thought of the Tricot report. He rolled his eyes and said, "It's not my business." Then he added, "I have my opinion on lots of subjects, but I don't shout it from the rooftops."

He called the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior "criminal" and "stupid." He also said it was "absurd" since the French Pacific fleet has always been able to prevent Greenpeace and other protest vessels from entering the Pacific test waters.

Mitterrand said, however, that sending intelligence missions to New Zealand is not illicit because

that country is "a platform for actions against France."

On television, Mitterrand noted that 3,000 people live at the test site and asserted that no one has ever been irradiated there. He invited the leaders and scientists of the 14 South Pacific nations that have called for creation of a Pacific nuclear-free zone to visit Mururoa and see for themselves.

He also called for access by French scientists to the test range in Australia where Britain once tested its atomic bombs so that French scientists can measure the effectiveness of Australian measures "to erase all trace of radioactivity." French sources indicated that this was meant as a reference to heavy contamination of the Australian site.

But Mitterrand went out of his way in his press briefing to distinguish between the Australians and the "intemperate" declarations of New Zealand's Lange. New Zealand had called Mitterrand's visit, with five Cabinet ministers in tow, a "provocation."

The president said France would soon offer the states of the region a cooperation program for civilian scientific experiments at Mururoa.

Asked why, if the French tests were safe, they could not be carried out in France, Mitterrand said they probably could. But he said that it would be costly to relocate the test center.